QUESTIONING MASCULINITIES: INTERROGATING BOYS' CAPACITIES FOR SELF-PROBLEMATIZATION IN SCHOOLS

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In drawing on selected interviews with adolescent boys from both Australia and North America, we present an analysis of boys' own capacities for interrogating gender normalisation in their school lives. We set this analysis against a critique of the public media debates about boys' education, which continue to be fuelled by a moral panic about the status of boys as the new disadvantaged. Our aim is to raise questions about boys' existing capacities for problematizing social relations of masculinity and how these might be mobilized in schools to support a counter-hegemonic practice committed to interrogating gender oppression.

Key words: gender reform, boys' education, masculinities, normalization

À partir d'un choix d'entrevues effectuées auprès d'adolescents venant de l'Australie et de l'Amérique du Nord, les auteurs présentent une analyse des capacités de ces garçons de remettre en question la normalisation en fonction des sexes dans leur vie scolaire. Les auteurs opposent cette analyse à une critique des débats dans les médias sur l'éducation des garçons, lesquels continuent à être alimentés par une panique morale au sujet du statut des garçons considérés comme les nouveaux défavorisés. L'objectif visé est de soulever des questions sur les capacités des garçons de problématiser les relations sociales masculines et de voir comment ces aptitudes pourraient être mobilisées dans les écoles pour appuyer une démarche antihégémonique visant à remettre en question l'oppression basée sur le sexe.

Mots clés : réforme et sexes, éducation des garçons, masculinités, normalisation

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Within the context of moral panic and feminist backlash about boys' education, the dominant discourse has been one that relies on essentializing differences between boys and girls to instigating gender and pedagogical reform in schools[1] (see Arnot & Miles, 2005; Foster, Kimmel, & Skelton, 2001; Froese-Germaine, 2004; Martino, Mills, & Lingard, 2004; Titus, 2004; Weaver-Hightower, 2003 for a critique of these debates). This context has involved resorting to calls for more male teachers, a boy friendly curriculum that caters more to boys' learning styles, and single sex classes as reform initiatives designed to counteract the feminisation of schooling and its supposed detrimental impact on boys' failing and flailing masculinities. For example, Hoff-Sommers (2000) claims that much of the feminist inspired gender reform in schools is based on denying the nature of boys by inciting them to be more like girls which ultimately diminishes their masculinity. Glaringly absent from these debates, however, are the perspectives of boys themselves. In this article, therefore, our aim is to present a more nuanced analysis of masculinities and schooling than that offered within the context of these debates by including the voices of adolescent boys who raise questions about the constraints and limits of conventional masculinities (see also Burgess, Park, & Robinson, 2004; Kehler, 2004; Kehler, Davison, & Frank, 2005; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003).

In drawing on interviews with seven adolescent boys from Australia (n = 3) and the United States (n = 4), our aim is to complicate the powerful tendency to homogenize and essentialize masculinity within the context of these debates about the boys (see Gurian, 2001). We use their voices to raise questions about the possibility of engaging boys in a counter-hegemonic practice that is committed to interrogating the limits of normalizing discourses through which they are constituted as gendered subjects. This discussion is set against the calls for gender reform within the context of debates about boys' education, the popular media, and educational policy (see Lingard, 2003; Martino, Mills, & Lingard, 2004). In short, the basis for imagining other possibilities for a gender reform agenda in schools needs to be organized around alternative political norms for interrupting hegemonic social relations of masculinities that do not rely on essentializing gender difference (Harding, 1998).

Although considerable literature documents the dynamics of masculinities in schools (see Frank, Kehler, & Davison, 2003; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Keddie, 2005; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Renold, 2004), we offer a specific analysis of boys' own understanding of the effects of the cultural norms governing the practices of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. Our analysis serves as a basis for examining the implications for gender reform in schools as they relate specifically to boys' education. This article, therefore, contributes to the field by providing an analytic perspective on gender reform in schools that foregrounds boys' already existing capacities for self-problematization and/or for interrogating masculinities in their own lives (Keddie, 2005; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, 2005). We found that the issue for these boys does not appear to be related to their lack of vocabulary to talk about gender socialization "outside of the machismo paradigm," as suggested by Burgess et al. (2004, p. 24). Rather, the problem appears to relate to the institutionalization of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity in schools that denies and silences such critical discourses in the first place. In this article, therefore, we use the boys' voices to examine their existing capacities for self-problematization and suggest ways to deploy these voices to illustrate the possibilities for embracing a counter hegemonic practice in schools that is committed to working with boys to interrogate hierarchical heterosexual masculinities (Connell, 1995). This examination is important because the research literature has often been directed to documenting the interplay of ascendant and subordinated masculinities in boys' lives at school or in particular schooling contexts and/or exposing the role that hegemonic boys play in perpetuating hierarchical power relations to illuminate the impact of such regimes on girls and/or marginalized boys in schools (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Mills, 2000; Skelton, 2001; Walker, 1998).

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

In this article, we focus on seven boys attending two different schools: one in the mid-west United States and the other in a major Australian city.[2] The boys at both sites were interviewed and data were collected and recorded through shadowing, observation, and audio-taped, semi-structured interviews.[3] The data we present in this article is largely taken

from the audio-taped interviews conducted at each of the research sites. In addition, the first author (Kehler) also draws on interview data emerging from participant responses to vignettes captured from field observations. These vignettes provided a context for further probing the understandings routinely expressed by the four young men. Central High is a mid-sized school, home to 1200 students in a largely middle class neighbourhood. Although the student population reflects considerable cultural diversity, over two thirds of the students are white Anglo American. The administration prides itself on being competitive both in athletics and academics and Central High is ranked above average in state test scores for reading and writing. For the purposes of this article, we focus on four senior-high school young men who participated in a six-month ethnographic research project during the final semester of their secondary school academic career. These young men had been identified by teachers at the school as publicly expressing behaviours and attitudes toward gender that were atypical of many of their male counterparts. At the time of the interviews, they were all aged 16-17 years. Philip was a football player and had been actively involved in school theatre. Thurston's interests in school revolved around music and poetry, while Hunter was the Student Council President. David was co-captain of the school hockey team. Each was considered popular amongst his peers.

Southern High is a large co-educational, Catholic school in a middle-class neighbourhood of a major Australian city with a population of just over 1000 students. The school comprised predominantly a white population and had a football reputation in the community because of a three-year consecutive record of state championships. Thirty boys, aged 15-16, were well-known to the researcher (Martino), who had been a teacher at the school for four years at the time the study was conducted. The research was conducted over two years. Those interviewed at the school talked at length about the influence of a group of boys who played football. This group, which comprised at least 30 boys, was referred to as *the footballers*. The friendship among this group becomes an important focus of analysis in this article. In revisiting the data, the researcher specifically chose three boys, Dave, Tom, and Shaun (all aged 16) because of their capacity to problematize the social relations of

masculinity embodied by the dominant group of footballers at Southern High. Dave was one of the state football players, but was not accepted as a member of the footballers' friendship group for reasons that will be explicated later in the article. Tom also played football and related to the footballers on superficial terms, but was not a member of their friendship group and expressed strong criticism about their attitudes towards and treatment of other boys at school whom they considered to be inferior. Shaun was an esteemed member of the footballer friendship group but did not play football.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

For this article, we adopt a critical sociological framework consistent with what Connell (1996) refers to as "the active politics of gender" (p. 210) and the public expression of these politics in the everyday lives of seven high-school young men. Our analysis is informed by an understanding of masculinities as social practices or relations that are negotiated in fluid and complex ways in the daily lives of boys in a manner that defies the public media's representation of the boy problem in schools (see Blair & Sanford, 2004: Froese-Germaine, 2004; Lingard, 2003; Sanford, 2006; Titus, 2004 for a more detailed analysis of these debates). In this sense, we argue against essentialist thinking that has assumed masculinity is an unchanging, common experience or fixed essence for all boys and that has gained a particular currency in the field of boys' educational policy and practice (see Biddulph, 1994; Gurian, 2001; Hoff-Sommers, 2000; House of Representatives Standing Committee, 2002). Connell (1995) has argued for a more fluid and dynamic conceptualization of masculinity. "Gender is not fixed in advance of social interaction but is constructed in interaction" (p. 35). West and Zimmerman (1991) highlight the process of doing gender and, most importantly, the significance of maintaining and managing gender identities that are routinely scrutinized or policed under the surveillance of others (see also Butler, 1990). Although this position has already been documented in the literature, our focus in this article is on boys' own self-awareness of and capacity to problematize these social relations and what the significance of these insights might be for developing boys' educational programs in schools. We in no way wish to imply that these

boys can somehow stand outside the discourse of hegemonic masculinity. Rather, in drawing attention to their willingness to question specific gender norms, we argue that this response appears to be related to their experiences of feeling constrained and pressured to conduct themselves according to the limits of what is defined as acceptable masculinity. In this sense, our focus is on the negotiation of masculinities from the standpoint of the boys' themselves within the context of drawing on a theoretical framework that attends to the fluidity of gender identity formation.

THE BOYS FROM CENTRAL HIGH

The "Typical Male" and Being "Normal"

The four boys at Central High, in various ways, were conscious of how dominant constructions of masculinity impacted on their lives (see Dorais, 2004). On some level, this consciousness appeared to be related to experiences of difference in their lives:

You can be who you are. You don't have to portray this image in front of people. Like, sometimes when I played football I felt like I had to project this image of myself, at least while I was on the field. But in the arts I can be who I am, I can do what I want and not feel like I have to answer to anybody. I can just be me. (Philip)

Philip articulated this sense of difference as a result of the freedom he experienced through participating in the Arts. He contrasts this experience with playing football where he felt a compulsion to project his masculinity. Different norms govern the performance of masculinities in each of these sites and he is attempting to articulate his understanding of this difference in terms of a sense of empowerment that is related to what he describes as a different experience of masculinity. Hunter also highlighted similar constraints related to the limits imposed by hegemonic masculinity.

It's like you have to come up and say the right things and do the right things in order to be cool. You can't just be yourself and you can't goof off in being cool. (Hunter)

Both boys foreground the extent to which the norms governing hegemonic masculinity impose constraints on "being yourself." There is a sense that to be a man requires a powerful investment in a conscious self-fashioning practice that is the public face of normative hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. Hunter identifies this practice in terms of "being cool" (Kehler, 2000). He demonstrates an awareness of the disconnection between the public and private faces of masculinity that is captured in his assertion that "you can't just be yourself," albeit an assumed essential self. Both boys, however, experience this expression of masculinity as an alienating experience and are conscious of the limits that are imposed on their sense of personhood. There is a strong sense that these boys' resistance to or questioning of specific gender norms are related to their experiences of feeling constrained and pressured to conduct themselves according to the limits of what is defined as acceptable masculinity.

It is possible to read Phillip and Hunter as negotiating the tensions between competing versions of masculinity that appear to emerge as potentially disruptive (see Connell, 1995). At this nexus, it becomes possible to identify the boys' capacities for self-problematization in relation to making sense of their own experiences of masculinity. For example, Thurston and Hunter foreground the extent to which discourses of masculinity extend beyond the school to exert a pervasive influence in enforcing a powerful regime of normalisation that both boys appear to be questioning.

The typical male, like what they've seen since they've been growing up of what guys are supposed to be like. You see guys on T.V. who are afraid to express their feelings. So they sort of are afraid to break from that. Like they feel the need to be normal. And I think they are just afraid to because they might be ostracized from some sort of community of friends. (Thurston)

[B]oys are afraid to express their feelings, that type of thing, because poetry is a very feelings sort of thing . . . . Less guys are willing to be in plays and sing unabashedly and write and express their feelings. (Thurston)

Sometimes you are really happy, you want to give a good hug. I think some people can't hug like Jason. He has to be big, rough, tough, like he's a man…. (Hunter)

Thurston talks specifically about "the need to be normal," which leads to a policing and surveillance of masculinity that he finds questionable. He frames the basis of such questioning in terms of its inhibiting consequences with regard to expressing feelings. Thurston identifies a pervasive fear that is driven by what appears to be experienced, in his view, as enforced normalisation. This fear is supported, he believes, by the media along with more informal exchanges between men that provide potent messages of "what guys are supposed to be like" as well as their awareness of the gendered subject matter such as English. What both boys draw attention to is the powerful influence of their peers – other boys – in terms of policing acceptable masculinity. For instance, they highlight the difficulty some men have in expressing their feelings, which is underscored by a need to be normal and to be accepted by their friends.

Each boy appears to be aware of particular norms that operated in their school to impact in very specific ways on their social relations of masculinity. In this sense, they had an implicit awareness of broader systemic relations of hegemonic masculinity that was institutionalized and legitimated within schools and in the broader society. For example, Philip's earlier comment with regard to football reveals competing versions of masculinities on and off the field. In addition, Thurston notes the gendering of specific subject matter connected to poetry, plays, and singing. David similarly explained that one version of masculinity was preferred over others at Central High, and highlights the issue of body fashioning as being central to his understanding about hierarchical relations of masculinity.

Not being huge but being bigger would be encouraged, just by what's attractive. I think it's just the way guys compare one another against each other. It's like, how much they can bench press. It's different ways of sizing people up. (David)

David similarly highlights physical prowess as one attribute underscoring a prevailing image of hegemonic masculinity that is

captured in his use of language, "sizing people up," to signify his understanding of a particular form of male power. This understanding was but one element of the physical body as a vehicle for defining masculinity at Central High. The four boys identified "toughness," "fighting," and "sexual talk" as central to defining dominant expressions of masculinity.   High-school masculinities thus emerged from discussions with the boys about their own understandings, definitions, and experiences of the rules of masculinity. In this sense, the four boys were literate about the social practices or rules of masculinity that impacted on their everyday lives at school (Kehler & Grieg, 2005). Their literacy was reflected in their capacity to identify and comment on particular "instances of masculinity" (Coleman, 1990) that entailed enforced normalisation organised around inciting men to compete with one another for more power and/or status. These boys were drawing on critical discourses about the social relations of masculinity despite the fact they claimed very little attempt in school had been made to raise important questions about masculinities. This admission raises important questions about the knowledge that students gain from engaging with the broader culture and which they bring with them to school.[4]

Intimacy Between Boys

These boys also demonstrated a capacity to interrogate the limits imposed by hegemonic heterosexual masculinity with regards to prescribing acceptable modes of expressing intimacy with other male peers**.** As Hunter says**, "**Certain people you just don't give hugs to unless it's a total joke . . . and there are people that I can really give a hug to and like, mean it.**"** Here Hunter highlights that "giving hugs" is dependent on the sort of boy the recipient is, which determines a shared understanding of how to interpret the action. Much like public displays of affection among men, Hunter demonstrates an awareness of the social training that has taught him how to relate differentially to other boys on certain occasions. Conventional social practices of engagement between these young men typically involved high-fives and aggressive body contact. At the same time, however, they indicated alternative social practices available to them which shed light on the tensions involved in

negotiating alternative possibilities and expressions of masculinity, while still maintaining or keeping in tact their heterosexuality. In this sense, these particular boys show an awareness of different norms for governing and determining their behaviour.

Tensions between competing versions of masculinities surface in situations that raise questions about gender appropriateness and normalization in relation to questioning one's sexuality (see Davison, 2004; Kehler, Davison, & Frank, 2005; Martino, 2000; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Thurston commented, "calling a guy a 'fag' is like an automatic button you can push" and demonstrates critical insight into how masculinity is guarded on several levels for these boys. As Kimmel (1994) argues, "[P]eers are a kind of gender police, constantly threatening to unmask us as feminine, as sissies" (p. 132) but the boys demonstrated a capacity to interrogate such practices of gender normalization and surveillance. However, although David, Philip, Thurston, and Hunter are critical of the limits of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, some question remains about the social and cultural capital that these boys possess that enables them to critique the rules of hegemonic masculinity, while still keeping intact an acceptable public performance of masculinity in the eyes of their peers. In their analysis Kehler, Davison, and Frank (2005) identify similar tensions across studies in which they describe the participants as "actors with various degrees of gender movement" (p. 65) who nonetheless "cultivated an awareness of how particular discourses of masculinity are saturated with status and privilege" (p. 64).

Thurston, for example, talked about his friendships with girls and how comfortable he felt in their company: "I can feel comfortable talking to them and I don't necessarily feel as comfortable talking with a bunch of guys". However, despite his friendships with girls, he did not display or embody a version of masculinity that led other boys to question his sexuality. In fact, each of these boys was respected and trusted by their peers. Hunter, for example, was seen as a confidant. He, along with the other young men, demonstrated an awareness but did not fear being unmasked as a "sissy."

Hunter, for example, highlights that most of his peers go with the flow, accepting and subscribing to the norms governing the fashioning of acceptable masculinity because they are afraid.

They are afraid from different angles. I think they're afraid that they'll get rejected or the girl[s] won't think they're a man…all the way to their friends making fun of them…[to being] afraid kind of whether he is saying the wrong things or just doesn't know what to say….And if he keeps his distance then it doesn't really matter because .. .he doesn't have to expose himself so he doesn't get hurt or lose anything. (Hunter)

But subscribing to such norms also confers a collective sense of power while simultaneously denying a certain degree or expression of intimacy among young men. This observation is supported by Kaufman (1999) who points out that, although many men hold power and reap its benefits, there is a "strange combination of power and privilege, pain and powerlessness" (p. 75). This dichotomy raises some important questions about how to engage boys in re-evaluating the effects of hegemonic masculinities as they experience it in their everyday lives. At this interface of experiencing a loss of power or a sense of constraint, possibilities exist for mobilising boys' already existing capacities for self-problematization in schools (see Martino, 2001).

These young men, for example, resisted dominant masculinizing practices and appear to be highlighting that the emotional and psychological costs of subscribing to such practices are greater than the risk of being ostracised by their male counterparts. On the other hand, the issue may possibly be one related to how these boys do their masculinity in culturally acceptable ways that enable them to embrace alternative norms of intimacy without the risk of being labelled gay or ostracised by their peers. Hunter suggests this possibility; he is strategic in directing expressions of affection or intimacy to his male peers, an act that appears to be based on his understanding about the sort of masculinity they display. This behaviour suggests that he possesses certain social skills or at least a capacity to relate to other boys on a differential basis that amounts to a particular currency or form of power that grants him the privilege of maintaining a socially acceptable masculinity in the eyes of his peers.

THE BOYS FROM SOUTHERN HIGH

The Power of the "Footballers"

Many boys who attended Sothern High in Australia also spoke about the impact of a pecking order of masculinities at school which was reflected in the status attached to boys, depending on the sort of friendship group to which they belonged. The most popular boys who were considered to have the most power and status were referred to by all the interview subjects as the footballers. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy were the more quiet boys who associated with girls as friends and/or played handball, a gender inclusive game played with a tennis ball with four people during lunch break.   Only certain boys participated in this largely non-competitive game marked out on the concrete with a large square divided into four quadrants. The game involved using the palm of one's hand to hit a tennis ball back and forth to participants while always ensuring that the ball bounced within the confines of one of the squares. It was an activity, however, that the footballers rejected or rather belittled as unmanly or simply a girl's game. The footballers, a large group of about thirty boys, maintained a physical presence on the oval during lunch break and considered themselves heroes as a result of having won three state football competitions, which had led to public celebration and endorsement of their achievement at school assemblies. Once again what is highlighted is the validation of a culturally specific form of embodied hegemonic masculinity that is institutionalized and taken for granted at this particular school. Also absent in this school was any direct or explicit instruction related to working with students to interrogate the social expectations of masculinity, yet, as will be illustrated in this section, some of the boys had already acquired the capacity to interrogate such practices.

    In this section, we focus on three boys: Dave and Tom, who both played football but who were not members of this large group of footballers, and Shaun, a member of the footballer group who did not play football. These three boys highlight how group membership is based not so much on the ability to play football, but on how boys do their masculinity. In other words, the sort of cultural and social capital that boys possess, in terms of their capacity to relate to other boys and to

perform their masculinities in ways that do not result in rejection by their male peers, makes the difference rather than simply just playing football. For example, although Dave was acknowledged as being a skilful football player, he was also considered to be gay on the basis of how he acted, which signified effeminacy. In his interview, Dave talks at length about the homophobic harassment he received at both his previous and current schools at the hands of a particular group of boys. He identifies the footballers as targeting him when he first arrived at his current school the year before. He talks about how the footballers who knew some of the boys from his previous school continued the homophobic abuse that they directed towards him as a result of his involvement and interest in ballet. However, it was not solely Dave's dancing that led other boys to question his masculinity and sexuality. In short, his questionable status as a proper male was related to the fact that other boys considered him to be effeminate and this appeared to override any other consideration of the potential status accrued on the basis of being a skilled football player. Moreover, the footballers related in ways to other boys and expressed certain attitudes that Dave did not embrace.

They considered themselves the most popular ... socially acceptable I think, compared to the other groups whom they see as maybe inferior to them in their social acceptability …. [What makes them popular is] their *masculinity*. They had a lot of football players, fights, threats, male attitudes were very much bolstered by each other. They kept each other going. So you had practically everyone in that group doing football, drinking beer, smoking, anything rebellious .... They considered themselves good looking and had a lot of girlfriend/boyfriend relationships and having sex was big talk. The younger you were when you had it the first time the better. It seems pretty primitive, but that was very big for them. (Dave)

Dave highlights that displaying masculinity for these boys is linked to asserting publicly their heterosexuality by boasting about their sexual exploits with girls (see Walker, 1988). He also demonstrates critical awareness of how these boys bolstered their heterosexual masculinity through social practices that involved playing football, smoking, and drinking and draws links between "having good looks" and acquiring a

high-status masculinity. On the basis of his marginalized position within the social hierarchy enforced by the footballers at this school, Dave appears to have developed some significant insights into power relations that reflect his capacity to interrogate hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. In this sense, experiences of marginalization have the capacity to contribute to cultivating a desire to seek out alternative social practices and relations as a coping mechanism or survival strategy.

This sense of marginalization is further exemplified when Dave mentions a group of popular girls who always talked about the footballers in their group and discusses their role in enforcing this version of masculinity.

The girls also had top ten lists for the boys. They judged the boys on good looks and their masculinity and how manly they were. It was sort of like you had the men as the roosters with them preening their feathers and going around the school kicking dirt into the face of other people and you had the girls watching to see who was the strongest, the most dominant. And the boys also would accept that male figure as the most manly of them all, the most socially acceptable, and they would look up to him. (Dave)

This quotation highlights the extent to which hegemonic heterosexual masculinity is negotiated within a set of social relations in which certain girls are active corroborators in supporting a particular hierarchical gender system. Dave's reference to the rooster-like pecking order highlights the extent to which he experienced such a system of hierarchical gender relations as oppressively intransigent or solidified. It also reflects his capacity for interrogating hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. Through such imagery, he articulates his understanding of the dominant boys' posturing of heterosexual masculinity which is on display, not only for the girls, but for other boys as well. This attribute of "being good looking" that Dave identifies relates once again to being a certain sort of boy, which carries a particular currency. However, being positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy or relegated to such a position by the dominant, cool boys and girls was clearly experienced by Dave in terms which capture both his sense of powerlessness and his feeling of entrapment.

This sense of powerlessness is evident when taking into consideration comments made by Tom, who was also very critical of the footballers and, more generally, of hegemonic practices of masculinity. However, he was afforded the privilege of not having his masculinity or heterosexual status readily being brought into question by his peers. Moreover, he was considered good looking and charming which made him very popular with girls and other boys in ways that Dave was not. In short, he had different social capital in terms of embodied masculinity, appearance, and social skills that was just not available to Dave, who was considered to be effeminate, self-centred, and a little arrogant or rather "big-headed." For instance, Tom, like Dave, also played football and was adamant in his criticism of the footballers from whom he clearly differentiated himself.

They put everything down, they attack things, they don't talk about their emotions and how they feel. I've had conversations with a lot of them and it's like talking to the same person because they all fit into this image of putting guys down who don't fit the masculine image .... As soon as you start talking about a certain girl who may be targeted, they start going on about their experiences with her and what they've done. They start almost bragging to prove themselves as this masculine guy who's done this and that. (Tom)

Here, Tom comments on the public display of hegemonic heterosexual masculinities embraced by the footballers but which he clearly rejects. The point is that he is able to dissociate himself from these boys' social practices without necessarily losing status. This status in part is related to the fact that he embodies a normative or straight masculinity that confers a particular legitimacy that is denied to Dave.

Acting "Cool"

Shaun, aged 16, a member of the footballer group who did not actually play football, was one of the highest achieving students in his year cohort. He speaks at length about the footballers and their practices. Despite the fact that he is a high achiever, he has the social and cultural capital in the form of embodying a normative straight masculinity and possesses a quick wit and sense of humour that is appreciated by his male peers. Moreover, his involvement as drummer in a heavy metal

band also led him to be held in high esteem by other boys. Other boys who were interviewed actually referred to boys like Shaun as "socially bright" in terms of being able to get along with other boys. However, although Shaun tacitly chooses to be an active member of the footballer group, and thus remains complicit in maintaining such a hierarchical system of masculinity, he nevertheless is quite critical of the behaviour of his friends. This criticism is illustrated in his comments about "acting cool," which is a distinguishing feature of the boys who gain membership to this group.

Now there's a lot of stuff that goes around like how much crap you can give to someone else and like kind of humiliate them, but it's like joking as well, and a lot of the 'cool' guys are good at it ...I suppose it's also like a test as well, like you sit there to see who can come up with the funniest and the quickest joke. (Shaun)

Shaun identifies the pecking order of masculinities and emphasizes the necessity to be popular with girls as another a rule or norm governing what it means to be cool.

I think it was because they were pretty popular with the girls, with the popular girls that stood out. And they were also like, you know, good at footy and stuff like that and that was why people would want to talk to them. (Shaun)

He also comments on the compulsion to be a "bad ass" at school which involved "getting into trouble" and misbehaving in class "just to be cool." However, Shaun appears to disapprove of such behaviours that involve acting cool. Moreover, he distances himself from such practices while still remaining a part of a group that collectively subscribes to such norms of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. There was a sense that he enjoyed the power of being able to play along with the charade of such displays of cool masculinity, while recognising the behaviour of his friends as often governed by a tendency to follow blindly stupid rules in the name of "acting cool." He rejected such unthinking behaviour and had a certain capital that enabled him to sit back and choose not to always participate directly in particular activities that he clearly rejected

as idiotic. There was a sense that he just sat back and engaged verbally using quick "come backs" and humour as a source of male power. Moreover, he also went to parties on the weekend and played music which also enabled him to accrue a certain amount of status in the eyes of his peers. In this sense, he straddles a number of social worlds or spaces because he is able to engage in critique of his peers' behaviours and practices while still benefiting from maintaining his position within the hierarchy of social relations that afford him a particular status among the cool boys.

Thus Shaun rejects certain behaviours and practices associated with "acting cool" because he can readily compensate for such deficits through accumulating other cultural capital (being a drummer in heavy metal band) and because he possessed certain social skills and capacities for relating to his peers in quite specific ways that conferred a degree of power. In this way, he was able and chose to remain an esteemed and likeable member of the group without apparently having his masculinity called into question. However, Shaun highlights that there are some rules that boys cannot afford to break. One of those rules is that "guys are meant to have guys as best friends."

I know that there's this one guy, Dave, who hangs around with a bunch of girls and people call him a 'faggot' and that's because he hangs around a bunch of girls and he hasn't got any guy friends really. (Shaun)

He also mentions that there are certain requirements for boys to socialise with one another: "I know that there are rules like being best friends with other guys and going and doing stuff with friends and like with other guys." Shaun demonstrates a capacity to problematize the norms governing hegemonic social practices of masculinity while still adhering to these norms to maintain status and privilege within his peer group. His observations about the imperatives for boys to behave in particular ways according to the norms of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity are further highlighted when he mentions that "guys don't really care about what girls think, they care more about what other guys think." These comments highlight the need for further research into investigating the conditions under which such acts of self-

problematization might be mobilized in schools as part of a critical literacy agenda for interrogating masculinities.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The comments of the boys documented in this article suggest a willingness to raise questions about the limitations of hegemonic masculinity as it is experienced in their everyday lives at schools. In fact, many of the boys we interviewed were willing to engage in such a critical practice and, moreover, demonstrated highly developed capacities for self-problematization (see also Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). However, they also claimed that their schools had provided few opportunities to engage with the sort of questions that we posed in our interviews. Hunter, for example, explained that these conversations rarely occurred in school. "At least not in the classroom. . . Actually, I would almost say not at all in school." Shaun explicitly mentions this absence of discussion in schools claiming that the "stuff that is important" and relevant to them in their daily lives as young men is not being addressed: "There has been stuff about 'don't fall to peer pressure,' but that's nothing as deep as going into stuff about how you feel about being masculine or what masculinity is."

Although engaging in a critique of the contradictions inherent in hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily constitute a counter-hegemonic practice – for example, many of the boys in this study, although critical, maintain privileged positions at the top of the peer group hierarchy. The question remains whether these boys would be interested in change if it did not afford them some advantage. However, the boys' questioning of masculinity in our research appears to grow out of their own commitment to building their self-esteem and a positive identity as young men. Their willingness to critique the norms governing displays of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity needs to be understood as driven by a desire to search for better alternatives of self-expression which, they believed, would lead to enhancing their lives and relationships with other people. This conclusion raises issues around creating a threshold for interrogating the systematic ways in which hegemonic masculinities are experienced in boys' lives at schools and how they come to negotiate their social practices of masculinity in this

context. In short, at this interface of experiencing a loss of power or a sense of constraint, as a consequence of subscribing to norms governing relations of hierarchical masculinities, possibilities exist for mobilising boys' capacities for self-problematization in schools. In taking such a focus on the limitations that hegemonic masculinity imposes, as a starting point in working with boys in schools, potential resistance to such a critical practice may well be minimised by those boys who might otherwise feel threatened.

The significance of our research highlights that boys' daily school experiences were far from what is captured by headline newspapers that repeatedly paint all boys as potentially emasculated victims of the feminisation of schooling. Thus concern about boys in school, we propose, might better be directed to taking a closer look at the social practices of masculinity among high-school young men to offer a more nuanced account of the effect of masculinities from the standpoint of the boys themselves. In this sense, we argue, it is imperative to hear not so much *about* the boys but *from* the boys if educators want to gain deeper insights into the factors having an impact on their lives and experiences of masculinity in schools. In this respect, further research into evaluating boys' education programs that are committed to engaging boys in such critical practices is needed. Such research carries the potential to move the gender reform debates beyond merely re-inscribing binary classifications of gender difference to a consideration of the liberatory potential of encouraging broader definitions of masculinity in schools that do not rely on a denigration of the feminised other.

NOTES

[1] *Moral panic* refers to the intensified concern over boys' failure in school. This term has been used to capture the neo-conservative political agenda that continues to position boys as the new disadvantaged and, hence, as victims of feminist interventions in education that have ignored their particular needs as males.

[2] This article began as a dialogue between the two authors who had met at a conference in Montreal in 1999 to discover that they had conducted similar doctoral research projects but on different continents. Although both research projects documented the interplay of masculinities in the lives of a specific group of white middle class boys, we were struck by the capacity of specific boys to

interrogate hierarchical heterosexual masculinity and its manifestations in their lived experience of peer group relations in schools.

[3] The names of schools and students used throughout the paper are fictional.

[4] Although the boys, for the most part, claimed that they had not been exposed extensively to critical discourses about masculinity through their formal education, they did indicate that some English teachers had raised questions about gender stereotypes in class. It is also important not to underestimate the influence of the media and popular culture in these boys' lives in terms of their developing understanding of masculinity. Several boys also mentioned the role of the researcher and the act of research itself in encouraging them to think critically about issues of masculinity and gender relations.

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